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ABSTRACT

This publication reviews a public-engagement program entitled "Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools." The program, which was implemented with help from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, called for policymakers to interact with the public in study circles in Arkansas and Oklahoma. The report relates what the policymakers had to say about this method of connecting with their constituents. They reported that study circles have the potential to benefit their work in two major ways: by increasing the flow of information between policymakers and constituents and by helping them build relationships with their constituents. The study circles allowed policymakers to hear a diversity of perspectives from constituents whom they would not ordinarily encounter, helped them to receive information that they then added to information received from other sources, enabled them to establish personal networks they could tap for information and expertise, and allowed for increased credibility among policymakers and constituents as each learned about the other's needs. Policymakers also viewed the study-circle format as a way to activate a new and broader constituency for public education. In general, the study circles offered a structure with the potential to bridge the gap between state education policymaking and the schools such policies affect. (RJM)

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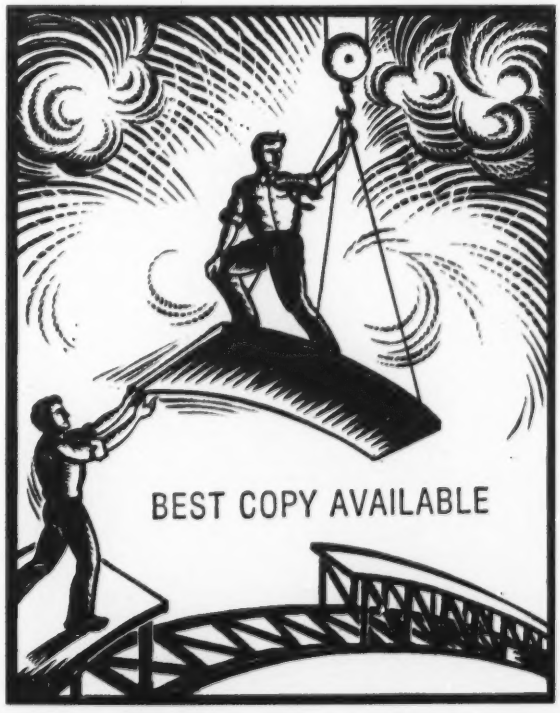
POLICYMAKERS BUILD BRIDGES TO THE PUBLIC

Policymakers hear often from lobbyists and education activists, but other citizens communicate with them less frequently, if ever. Some policymakers have been trying out a new policy tool to help them connect with constituents on important education issues.

Policymakers pull information from many sources to help them understand and weigh education issues. In developing a position on school choice, education finance, curriculum content, or achievement standards, they consider the knowledge and opinion of experts, what they see or hear in the media, what their colleagues tell them, and what constituents say. But most policymakers will tell you that they have yet to find an in-depth and ongoing way to communicate with constituents.

This issue of *Insights on Education Policy, Practice, and Research* reports what happened when policymakers interacted with the public in a public engagement program SEDL helped implement in 1998, "Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools." It is the last in a series of *Insights* on SEDL's investigation of the potential use of study circles to engage the public and state-level decision makers in discussions about education. The first *Insights* of the series, published in October 1999, introduced the concept of "deliberative community dialogue," a form of public engagement of which study circles are a part. That edition suggested how this method might benefit policymakers, educators, and the general public as they seek to improve public education. In December 1999, *Insights* followed that discussion with the results of interviews with selected state legislators in Florida, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania about the potential of deliberative dialogue as a way to gather information from the public for setting edusation policy. This *Insights* goes one step further. It examines the results of SEDL's research on the implementation of the "Calling the Roll" program and discusses what poli-



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By listening to what constituents say and taking their education expertise, experience, and values seriously, policymakers gain valuable information and demonstrate a commitment to the communities they serve.

cymakers who participated in study circles in Arkansas and Oklahoma had to say about this method of connecting with their constituents.

THE "CALLING THE ROLL" PROGRAM

Since the early 1990s SEDL has been interested in methods of public discourse that connect policymakers with the public. At that time, communities in each of the states in SEDL's region—Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas—were experiencing deep divisions over curricular and instructional reforms, including standards, literature-based reading, sex education, and HIV/AIDS awareness programs. In response, several chief state school officers on SEDL's Board of Directors asked the regional laboratory to probe for reasons behind the public's discontent with state policies. This request led SEDL to investigate methods, other than the more traditional hearings, panels, testimonies, and polls, that might connect policymakers with their constituents around issues of public education.

Since an early edition of *Insights*, entitled "Education Activism of Cultural Conservatives," SEDL has been reviewing the relevant literature as background information to the question of connections between policymakers and the public. Current research and theory about democratic political philosophy, policymaker knowledge utilization, and policy change reveal two important concepts in public education policy development. First, policy development is a dynamic interaction among interrelated processes and second, sound policymaking relies on the processing of complex knowledge. In considering the policy development process in this way, the question became, "How can the participation of ordinary people in discussions with their policymakers bring them into this dynamic policymaking process and contribute to policymakers' decision making toward solving state education problems?"

To pursue this question SEDL decided to focus on study circles, a form of deliberative dialogue, because the study circles structure would allow policymakers and the public to interact differently than they might be able to using more traditional methods. Study circles have been used by more than 200 communities in the last decade as a community-wide process for local problem solving around such questions as education reform and racism. The process lends itself to having a range of impacts from the personal or individual to small group or community wide.

As an established model for facilitating dialogue among members of the public, study circles have the basic purpose of enabling people to constructively discuss an issue of shared concern. The process is a semistructured, multistep approach to engaging people over time in small group discussions. Study circles generally consist of eight to twelve participants. They meet for four to six sessions of two or more hours each over a period of a month or longer. Discussion in study circles usually progresses from sharing of personal experiences about education, to deliberation about different perspectives on education issues, and finally to the development of a common sense of direction and consideration of potential action that might solve problems identified by study circle participants.

In "Calling the Roll," a set of 15 community-wide study circles took place from September through November of 1998 in Arkansas and Oklahoma. Arkansas Friends for Better Schools (AFBS)—an alliance of advocates for public education representing education, business, civic, and religious organizations—guided and assisted the implementation of community-wide study circles in five cities and towns across the state. AFBS estimates that 374 people attended those study circles. The League of Women Voters of Oklahoma (LWVO) coordinated the study circles in that state. More than 500 people attended those study circles. Across both states, 24 policymakers agreed to participate. Those policymakers were state legislators and other key state-level education decision makers. In the end, four policymakers were unable to attend any of the sessions, while several others were able to attend from one to all four sessions of their study circle.

As part of the study circles process, participants typically receive a discussion booklet about education, prepared in advance by the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC) to give them some common knowledge about the issues to be discussed. For the "Calling the Roll" program, SEDL and its partners prepared supplemental discussion materials on the issue of accountability, which was the topic selected in both states. Participants received the supplemental materials during the first study circle session.

The overall investigation of study circles had two goals: (1) to explore how the participation of policymakers in study circles with their constituents affects the state education policymaking process and (2) to learn about the process of implementing a statewide program of study circles on education that includes policymakers. To address the goals, SEDL staff surveyed and interviewed state and local coordinators, a sample of participants, and the policymakers who participated in the study circles to learn about their expectations, experiences, and viewpoints. In Arkansas and Oklahoma, implementation took place at the community rather than the state level. The research data are therefore unable to answer questions of how a statewide program is planned and implemented. Nevertheless, state policymakers' experiences yielded important information about their satisfaction with the process for connecting with constituents that has implications for planning statewide programs in the future. Analysis of interviews and survey responses identified two themes that emerged as important ways study circles were able to build bridges between policymakers and constituents: increasing information flow and building relationships. In addition, SEDL's policy research suggests two preliminary findings (that are beyond the scope of this study) regarding the impact of study circles on the public's degree of civic participation. These were activating a broader constituency and initiating or supporting policy action. (See chart on page 5.)

STUDY CIRCLES INCREASE INFORMATION FLOW

Study circles offer policymakers the opportunity to receive and provide information. By listening to what constituents say and taking their education expertise, experience, and values seriously, policymakers gain valuable information and demonstrate a com-

Community dialogue gives policymakers and constituents the opportunity to explore and develop strategies for change together.

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mitment to the communities they serve. By providing citizens information drawn from their own expertise, experience, and values, policymakers build awareness about important education issues and the state policymaking process. Policymakers who participated in SEDL's research outlined four ways that study circles increased the flow of information: providing them with access to diverse perspectives, an opportunity to exchange information with constituents, a reality check on their policy directions, and the opportunity to reevaluate or change their perspectives.

Access to Diverse Perspectives

Policymakers stated that the opportunity to hear and consider a wide range of constituent perspectives was the most valuable part of the study circle experience. Because study circles are open to people from all sectors of the community, participants come from a range of educational and socioeconomic backgrounds and with a range of perspectives. One policymaker recalled, "We had minority people, we had businessmen, we had women, we had young people, old people, young parents, people who had kids in school and [kids] no longer in school. Our mayor's assistant was there. One of the municipal judges was there. It was a good group."

Policymakers saw the views of these individuals as adding balance to the views of lobbyists and other education activists who normally communicate with them. "In spite of all we talk about, all we hear that is wrong with schools, there were . . . students there that night and I thought every one of them was just as impressive as could be. I appreciated that exposure," said one. Some participants recounted personal stories that provided policymakers with the human side of education policy and practice. At other times, it provided a positive counterbalance to the frequent criticisms that policymakers hear about the state of public education. When the "education clique" dominates communications, a policymaker observed, "ordinary teachers don't get their story out."

Information Exchange

Community dialogue gives policymakers and constituents the opportunity to explore and develop strategies for change together. Policymakers hear various perspectives on education needs, problems encountered, and emerging issues. They add their own perspective to the mix and everyone learns from one other. Policymakers in study circles valued the exchange of information with their constituents. It allowed them to draw upon information in their work that they might not have had access to otherwise and helped them clarify their thinking, especially about local school programs. "I learned of some very good programs that we have in the . . . school system. Since I have no children there and have not been actively involved in [schools for] a while, I didn't know about those programs," a policymaker remarked.

Other policymakers talked about how they hoped study circles would create a more informed citizenry. They saw one of their own roles as being a source of information for citizens, both on important education matters and on the nature of the policymaking process itself. By helping the public gain new or better insight into education issues, they hope to increase the depth of the dialogues they have with the public. One policymaker cited the "civility" with which participants addressed each other as the best part of study circles. "I've had what some would call town hall meetings [where] some people would stand up and start hollering and then the meeting would just totally get out of control. Conversely in the study circles, that respondent observed that "everybody knew that they were there to try to accomplish something."

Reality Check on Policy Directions

Policymakers strive to achieve a measure of alignment between the needs, opinions, and values of their constituents before their policy directions harden. For that reason, they viewed study circles as tools with which to check their perceptions of issues and public attitudes. While the small-group format was never expected to produce broad consensus on education policies and programs, it did help reduce uncertainty about what citizens were actually thinking and the reasons behind their thinking, which was more than policymakers said they usually got from opinion polls and focus groups. Several policymakers underscored the point that such reality checks were necessary to reach a balanced understanding of the issues and to affirm for themselves that their stance on an issue was indeed correct. Sometimes, this information reinforced what policymakers already thought and believed. Such was the case for one policymaker who noted, "It makes me feel stronger because . . . I opposed it already and so having been there and feeling like everybody else felt the same way about it . . . and had the same concerns makes me stronger in my opposition to it."

Study Circles Bridging the Gap Between Policymakers and the Public

POLICYMAKERS

Study circles can provide a structure for enhanced information flow and relationship building.

Increased Information Flow

Study Circles improve information flow by facilitating:

- access to diverse perspectives
- information exchange
- reality check on policy directions, and
- reevaluation or change in perpectives

Building Relationships

Study circles build relationships by strengthening:

- personal networks
- mutual credibility, and
- personal commitments toward public education

Study circles can provide a process for encouraging civic participation. A stronger civic capacity has potential for activating a new and broader constituency who can initiate or support education policy action.

PARTICIPATING PUBLIC

NONPARTICIPATING PUBLIC

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Who Are Constituents?

A preliminary survey (Mutchler and Johnson, 1999) conducted prior to the "Calling the Roll" program had revealed that policymakers consider their constituents to be their single most important source of information and opinion on educational issues. But who are these constituents? SEDL's research reveals that policymakers view their constituents as ranging from those individuals they work with regularly to the more general public with whom they work less often or not at all.

The Policy Subsystem

Members of the *policy subsystem* are elected officials, state agency representatives, and other political influencers such as education association lobbyists and representatives from political and religious organizations. These individuals

- are focused and committed to specific education agendas.
- represent interests with an immediate stake in the issues.
- are highly involved in the political process, often initiating contacts by phone, letter, or email, to influence policy decisions, or inviting policymakers to speak at their organization's functions.

While these individuals may be members of the public by definition, they might more reasonably be viewed as part of the state policy development system—directly connected to state policymakers' processes of information gathering and deliberation. Many policymakers rely on individuals and groups from this political arena to help them gain information on policy issues. After policymakers recognize the stances or biases, they frequently regard members of this system as important and often trusted influences during the education decision-making process.

Participating Public

Members of the *participating public*, while sometimes lacking a formal organizational affiliation, are visible influences in education decision making. They include parents, business owners, retirees, students, and educators. Members of this group

- have a personal or professional stake in an issue.
- participate in the voting booth, in local organizations, at public events, or by contacting school staff and elected officials.

Policymakers usually connect with these individuals through constituent phone calls, letters, and email, polling, personal ties, advisory panels, and community meetings. They offer a perspective that informs decision makers of local needs and issues and helps clarify the potential impact of state policy on the schools and communities they represent.

Nonparticipating Public

Members of the *nonparticipating public* participate little or not at all in civic issues. "They are the probably the members of the silent majority," said one legislator. Policymakers reported they didn't understand why they do not participate, but speculated that some of the reasons included apathy, disenfranchisement, and intimidation by the political process. Policymakers said they find it difficult to respond to the needs of the nonparticipating public because they have no way of knowing what they are. Policymakers also expressed concern about the ramifications that the low level of participation by members of this group will have for democratic representation.

Reevaluation or Change in Perspectives

Sometimes new information gleaned from study circles pointed the way toward corrections in policy directions. Several policymakers who participated in study circles reported that the dialogue to which they were exposed changed their opinion or enabled them to see education issues from a new light. Most often they developed new perspectives on local education efforts by teachers and parents. One respondent said study circles "increased my opinion of teachers so I tend to be on their side a little more." Another explained his changed view of education this way: "Schools are more of a local issue than I thought. That is to say that the problems that people perceive: . . . discipline problems, teacher problems . . . are more local in nature and . . . you couldn't cure them if you wanted to from the state level."

STUDY CIRCLES AFFECT RELATIONSHIPS

Getting to know their constituents and establishing trust are key elements that policymakers identified as necessary for doing their jobs well. These same elements build credibility for policymakers' agendas and ultimately affect their efforts to be reelected. When SEDL researchers asked policymakers, "Do you think your constituents have a clear understanding of your views on education?" nearly one half responded "no." Even policymakers who responded positively understood relationship building to be a difficult ongoing process.

Study circles affected policymakers' relationships with their constituents in two different ways. They broadened policymakers' personal networks and they helped both policymakers and constituents gain mutual credibility.

Personal Networks

The policymaker respondents identified helping them expand their personal networks as one positive result of study circles. From the interview and survey data, it is evident that policymakers struggle with establishing strong relationships with their constituents. A number of policymakers talked about study circles as offering a way for them to broaden their education networks so that in the future they could draw upon other participants' information and expertise. Said one policymaker, "One thing for sure . . . is I developed a much closer relationship with three or four of those people that I will see in the community and I have felt a bit more of an attachment to them." Another policymaker found that after the study circles she felt like she really knew some of the participants. She said that since the study circles, "I have seen all of them . . . and we've had more in-depth communication. It was like two friends meeting rather than just someone saying hello." Broader networks, in turn, increased policymakers' connections to constituents, which enabled them to bring the public's concerns into the policy arena and motivated them to seek policy solutions to problems of high public concern.

Mutual Credibility

Study circle dialogues also increased mutual credibility among policymakers and constituents. Policymakers were able to show that they understood public needs and concerns about edu-

From the interview and survey data, it is evident that policymakers struggle with establishing strong relationships with their constituents.

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cation and were better able to represent their interests. Constituents, on the other hand, were able to express their needs and recognize that policymakers did show genuine interest in their opinions and suggestions. A new understanding and respect for each other's roles in public education emerged as a result. Some policymakers changed their views of teachers, in particular, becoming more sympathetic of the tough circumstances in which teachers often find themselves and more supportive of the efforts of teacher and parents in helping students to succeed.

INCREASED CIVIC PARTICIPATION

In addition to the themes of information flow and relationship building, analyses of interviews with policymaker participants suggested two tentative findings that were beginning to emerge but were beyond the scope of this study. Some of the policymaker-respondents speculated that given an increase in information flow and stronger relationships with the public, constituent participation in community study circles might become the first step in public initiation or support of policy action. Interviews with the policymakers suggest that study circles have the potential to activate a new and broader constituency for public education by offering a process by which policymakers and the public can work together.

Activating a New, Broader Constituency for Public Education

As the public comes to understand the state policymaking arena and how policymakers do their work, the potential emerges for individual community members to become active advocates for school reform. A number of policymakers saw study circles as a useful format for promoting and enabling greater public participation in education because they gave citizens and legislators the opportunity to talk constructively about education issues. One policymaker remarked, "Just the dialogue has a lot. . . . If you can get the parents and the citizens involved, you accomplish an awful lot because you bring closer together the educational process and the people they are serving." Another policymaker elaborated, "The legislation we consider, for the most part, is not generated so much by the individual legislator but by the . . . wants, needs, or suggestions of their constituents or lobbyists or people with special interests. So if that type of . . . dialogue continues and the community gets involved, then you will have more ideas coming to the legislature, many of which would be very good ideas [and] some of which would not be, but that is true in any situation."

Initiation or Support of Education Policy Action

While community dialogue in itself does not guarantee an increased level of public action in education, several policymakers were hopeful that it would shape a new and broader constituency into an active political force. Although SEDL did not try to pinpoint direct applications of study circles on state education policy action, some evidence suggests that interactions between policymakers and the public in these community deliberations did enter into policymakers' thinking and actions. During the time that the study circles took place, policymakers generated new policy ideas with which to respond to the needs of schools and communities, and they increased or decreased support for initiatives that were already underway. Said one policymaker, "I'm going to have at least one education bill of my own that I'll be running with, so I think when I discuss the issues or we talk about education, . . . I feel like I'll be able to speak with a little more authority."

CHALLENGES TO POLICYMAKERS' SATISFACTION

Policymakers readily listed the benefits they saw accruing from their participation in study circles. SEDL also asked its respondents about the challenges of gaining satisfaction from participation in study circles. Two major issues that policymakers offered were low constituent attendance and scheduling conflicts. Secondary issues that affected the degree of satisfaction with their experience included relevance of discussions and nonconstructive dialogue.

Low Constituent Attendance

When participants, whether policymakers or members of the public, think that the study circle dialogue is worth the time they devote to it, they are more likely to attend. They are also more likely to attend when they feel that others value their contributions. In some study circles, the balance of attendees tended to be members of the policy subsystem—state-level officials and active education stakeholders—with whom policymakers regularly interacted (see sidebar,

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Given an increase in information flow and stronger relationships with the public, constituent participation in community study circles might become the first step in public initiation or support of policy action.

page 6). The constituents they heard from less often were not present in large numbers. One policymaker remarked that the people attending the study circle in her neighborhood were those with whom she already was in contact and did not include constituents outside her own personal networks.

According to policymakers, the low public turnout in their study circles, either in terms of sheer numbers or constituent representation, was the most significant dissatisfaction with their study circle experience. Of the fourteen policymakers who identified negative aspects of their experiences, eight identified low attendance as a factor that affected their ability to gain the most out of this method of interacting with constituents.

One policymaker simply could not fully participate in his study circle because of the low numbers of attendees. He implied that without at least a few people representing his constituency, the time spent in dialogue was not worthwhile. Low attendance not only limited the flow of information but also cut down on the number of perspectives that participants represented—the very reason policymakers agreed to attend the study circles in the first place.

Scheduling Conflicts

Attending study circle sessions extracts a significant time commitment from participants. This commitment is difficult for policymakers, in particular, to make. In both states where study circles took place, senators and representatives are elected as citizen legislators. This means that in addition to carrying out legislative

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The challenges to policymaker satisfaction in study circles can be overcome in communities intent on forging a stronger connection between policymakers and the public on issues of public education.

responsibilities, they also hold jobs or run a business to earn a living. In addition, election season, the legislative session, and other meetings compete heavily for policymakers' time.

Scheduling study circle events must take all of these circumstances into account. A number of policymakers told SEDL researchers that it was difficult to carve out the time to participate fully in study circles. When policymakers were unable to regularly attend, the positive impact of the study circle experience was diminished.

Relevance of Discussion

The more that dialogue in a study circle focuses on a community's or state's current education agenda, the more relevant it will be to policymakers. To attain a high degree of relevance for policymakers, facilitators and the group must focus discussion on pressing, high-profile, and timely education issues. A few policymakers expressed disappointment at not being able to gain any new information relevant to their work because the study circle groups raised topics that were different from those facing the legislature. Later, however, one of these policymakers revealed that when study circle participants did not focus on charter schools (which happened to be a current policy interest of hers), her own disappointment had impaired her ability to understand that the constituents were in fact communicating their views about this education strategy: They didn't discuss charter school reform because they simply were not interested in it.

Even with interest, a focused discussion on a policy-relevant topic alone won't ensure that the discussion will be relevant to policymakers. Relevance is also related to the participants' knowledge about given education issues. A few policymakers found that the level of the general public's knowledge about an education issue was not high enough to be useful to help them with the issues facing them in legislative committees.

Nonconstructive Dialogue

Constructive dialogue is at the heart of the study circle process. Too many negative comments and complaints detracted from the benefits some policymakers derived from study circles. One policymaker put it this way: "It seemed to me there are more complaints than solutions and I think the purpose of these, to my notion, should be, 'How can we fix this?' not just continuing on the complaint path."

Similarly, when one member of the group dominates or disrupts the flow of communication, constructive discussion can break down. A policymaker recalled having a participant in his group who was "out of sync with the group" and a "pain in the neck." Such individuals who are not able to contribute constructively can become "spoilers" for others unless the facilitator controls the situation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION

Policymakers who took part in study circles were overwhelmingly positive about the potential of this process to bridge the gap between state education policies and the schools and communities that such policies affect. Study circles, they suggested, could create broader input for decision making by opening up the lines of com-

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munication between policymakers and their constituents. Such community dialogues could increase support for public education by providing a means of bringing education initiatives into alignment with community priorities and creating an atmosphere of trust and credibility. Moreover, they might foster civic participation and school and community partnerships for collaborative action among policymakers, teachers, parents, businesspeople, students, administrators, and other taxpayers. Finally, they could support the democratic principle of citizen participation in the state education policymaking process.

The challenges to policymaker satisfaction in study circles ought not to be insurmountable in communities intent on forging a stronger connection between policymakers and the public on issues of public education. Most challenges can be addressed by program implementers and study circle discussion facilitators, and all are likely to diminish over time as community members and their policymakers gain experience—if they choose to keep the dialogue going.

And as one policymaker said about his constituents and other members of the public, "What we do, we do for them . . . one way or the other." That alone is reason enough to continue the dialogue.

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INSIGHTS

AT A GLANCE

This edition of *Insights on Education Policy, Practice, and Research* recounts the experiences of policymakers who took part in a series of study circles with their constituents to discuss critical education issues in their communities. The two goals of SEDL's investigation of these study circles were to:

- explore how the participation of policymakers in study circles with their constituents affects the state education policymaking process.
- learn about the process of implementing a statewide program of study circles on education that includes policymakers.

Policymakers indicated that study circles have the potential to benefit their work in two major ways—(1) by increasing the flow of information between policymakers and constituents and (2) by helping them build relationships with their constituents.

Study circles increased the flow of information between policymakers and constituents because

- Study circles are open to people from all sectors of the community, and policymakers hear a diversity of perspectives from constituents whom they would not ordinarily encounter.
- Policymakers receive information from constituents that they then add to information they get from other sources to make policy decisions and they provide information to help inform citizens on education issues and policymaking processes.
- Study circles become tools policymakers can use to check their perceptions of public attitudes toward education issues.
- New information gleaned in study circles may result in policymakers reevaluating or changing their perspectives and policy directions.

Study circles helped policymakers build relationships with their constituents because

- Study circles enabled policymakers to establish personal networks they could tap for information and expertise.
- Study circle dialogues increased mutual credibility among policymakers and constituents as each learned about the other's needs, concerns, and constraints.

In addition to these major benefits, policymakers also viewed the study circle format as being able to activate a new and broader constituency for public education. As the public comes to further understand the policymaking arena, the policymakers in this study hoped that the public would become more involved in civic life.

While policymakers readily listed the benefits they saw accruing from their participation in study circles, they pointed out the following aspects of implementation that led to their dissatisfaction:

- low constituent participation, or in some cases, the overrepresentation of individuals and groups with whom the policymaker already had frequent contact and
- scheduling conflicts that made it difficult for policymakers to fully participate in study circles.

Two other issues that were less important but affected the level of satisfaction were these:

- discussions that focused on different issues than those that were before the state legislature at that time and
- negative comments and complaints from other participants that disrupted the flow of discussion or individuals who dominated the discussion without making constructive contributions.

In general, SEDL's examination of the implementation of study circles in 15 communities showed that study circles offer a structure with the potential to bridge the gap between state education policymaking and the schools and communities such policies affect. To strengthen that connection, however, the process must be put into practice in ways that maximize the benefits of the experience for everyone.

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